



July 5, 2022: Comments

**Submitted to City of Kirkland City Council, City Manager, and Chief of Police
By the Right To Breathe Coordinating Committee**

As you study the future of the City's role with the Student Resource Officer (SRO) program, we would like to remind the City of the position of Right to Breathe Coordinating Committee.

Our position on this is clear. Consistent, in-school presence of armed, uniformed police officers harms Black students. Reports detailing the many ways this is true abound and are virtually undisputed.

In your discussions and decision-making, we encourage you to be equally clear. What is the harm you are seeking to prevent, decrease, or eliminate? And what is the sacrifice you are asking Black people to make in order to fulfil your policy aims?

Much of the stated motivation for expansion of the SRO program was to address the tragedy of school mass shootings. It should be clear by now that the presence of police officers – whether they were in the school in advance of an active shooter's arrival or shortly thereafter – is not determinative of the quality of the response. Instead, it is the readiness of the officers – their training, planning, and willingness to engage – that determines the effectiveness of the response. While increasing readiness among specific officers - possibly a tactical unit - may be an effective step in addressing the need to provide a robust and timely response, there is no reason to believe that individual SROs are the best solution to these horrific occurrences. So, if your policy goal is to provide the best possible response to the tragic incidences of active shooters in schools, SROs simply haven't proven themselves to be the right solution.

Active shooters at schools occur far too often. Having said that, they are still a statistical unlikelihood at any specific school. On the other hand, having armed, uniformed police officers in school on a regular basis creates a near certainty that some students will be harmed. Some will face psychological ill-effects related to the mere presence of armed, uniformed officers during an era in which mental health among students is in crisis. Some will suffer an increase in policing interactions - like questioning, detention, and arrests - for non-criminal activity. Some will be exposed to weapons drawn at them or in their vicinity, putting their very lives at risk. The evidence this is true is overwhelming. And all of these fall disproportionately on Black students.

There are those who have complicated the discussions about this issue by proposing there are ancillary benefits to having SRO's in consistent, ongoing relationships with students. However, the vast majority of these benefits would be maximized if the adult in the adult-student relationship were a teacher, counselor, or other student-focused professional with childhood development and/or mental health training. Right To Breathe agrees with experts who believe the resources currently supporting SROs would be vastly better spent in support of expanding access to these trained professionals.

It would be heartbreaking to continue to subject some students to the ongoing negative psychological affects and potential bodily harm of armed, uniformed officers in schools in exchange for the rare possibility that an SRO will be in the right place, at the right time, have the appropriate information, training, and mindset to intervene in a manner that will actually decrease the impact of an active shooter. The fact that this is up for debate is a painful reminder that the real-world wellbeing of Black students is too easily bartered in exchange for the perception of comfort and preferences of the White majority.



Right To Breathe has had the ability to consistently communicate the ways that the City of Kirkland has been a leader on the Eastside in making policy changes in support of the safety and respect for Black people. Given the fact that the City of Issaquah is in the process of devolving their police from the SRO program and that the City of Bellevue is in a significant re-design of their involvement, we would be forced to communicate that Kirkland lags in this area in the absence of policy action addressing the concerns stated here.

We strongly urge you to stop sacrificing the well-being of Black people in order to comply with the perceptions and preferences of others. Sunset SROs and use the resources to increase safety, support, and respect for all students, including those who are Black.

James Whitfield, Kirkland Resident
On behalf of the Right To Breathe Coordinating Committee